



Disinformation is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain.<sup>40</sup>

At the time of writing, there is little published research on the gender dimensions of disinformation and what could be done to counter it. However, this 'in a nutshell' guide provides an initial analysis of what 'gendered disinformation' looks like and some guidance on how to counter it using strategic communications interventions.

**Box 15. Simply put: what is mis-, dis- and mal-information?<sup>41</sup>**

- Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant.
- Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.
- Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

There is evidence that women and girls suffer disproportionately from online violence, including online abuse and harassment.<sup>42</sup> Online violence takes many forms and uses many means. These include, for example, doxing (e.g. publishing a woman's home address on the Internet with the insinuation that she is soliciting sex), sextortion (e.g. threatening to release intimate pictures of a woman in order to extort sex), trolling (e.g. posting messages that incite violence against women), cyber stalking, threats of violence, and cyber bullying as well as certain forms of disinformation (see below) and malinformation (e.g. an article revealing a person's sexual orientation even though it is not in the public interest to do so).

**What does gendered disinformation look like?**

**Disinformation campaigns have targeted high-profile women, particularly politicians, journalists and women's rights activists, in an effort to discredit, intimidate and/or silence them.**<sup>43</sup> These campaigns have used **tactics** such as:

- **posting fake sexualised information, images and videos** that violate what is considered socially-acceptable behaviour for women or men (see Examples 1 and 2 below);
- **posting doctored images, videos, memes to discredit or ridicule;**<sup>44</sup>
- **using automation to further amplify their attacks.**

**Example 1:** A sexualised disinformation campaign targeting a female politician in Ukraine in 2017 aimed to discredit and humiliate her by posting fake sexualised tweets and doctored images claiming to show her naked<sup>45</sup> (see **Box 16**).

**Box 16. Case study of sexualised disinformation<sup>46</sup>**

Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk gave a speech to the United Nations on the effect of her country's war with Russia on women, stating that, because of the conflict, Ukrainian women had shifted their focus "from equality to survival." A screenshot began appearing on posts about her speech showing a faked tweet claiming that she had promised to run naked through the streets of Kyiv if the Ukrainian army lost a key battle. To underline the point, the message was accompanied by doctored images purporting to show her totally naked. "It was all intended to discredit me as a personality, to devalue me and what I'm saying," says Zalishchuk.

**Example 2:** In the run up to the Georgian parliamentary elections in 2016, fake sex videos were circulated of several female politicians and one male politician. One of the videos alleged that the male politician was gay. In a socially-conservative country, where extra-marital sex is not tolerated for women, and where homophobia is common, these allegations were designed to discredit and intimidate.

Research shows that online harassment and abuse, which include certain forms of disinformation, have a ‘chilling effect’ on women who either stop posting their views online<sup>47</sup> or pause their online activity.<sup>48</sup> They also have a broader effect on women more generally, discouraging them from becoming politically active and being vocal about their opinions.<sup>49</sup> In countries where there are high penalties for violating social norms, online slurs can translate into physical attacks.

**Disinformation campaigns use narratives on gender roles, gender equality and sexual orientation to:**

- polarise public debates;
- undermine social cohesion; and/or
- spread fear.

**These gender narratives are often combined with narratives on religion, race or immigration to maximise the desired impact.** Five disinformation tactics are provided below.

*Tactic 1:* Disinformation campaigns **manipulate traditional stereotypes about women and men**, often promoting stereotypes of women as victims in need of male protection, but also occasionally showing women as breaking from traditional gender norms to become violent aggressors.

**Women as victims.** According to ‘EU vs Disinfo’, a common disinformation narrative spread by pro-Kremlin outlets is the ‘Islamisation of Europe’. In this narrative, **women are portrayed as victims of Islamisation** (“they are forced to prostitute themselves for migrants, to wear hijabs or even to undergo genital mutilation”<sup>50</sup>) **and as victims of moral and social decay.**<sup>51</sup> Within extremist right-wing (XRW) organisations, the **notion of the threat of minority races and immigrants** (e.g. as rapists and victimisers) to **innocent white women** has been a potent mobiliser to garner support for their cause. The term ‘rapeugee’, for example, has been coined by XRW groups to paint refugees as preying on (specifically white) girls in people’s neighbourhoods and to further claims that Islam is misogynistic and supports paedophilia<sup>52</sup>, thus, justifying violent assaults on minority and immigrant communities.

**Women as aggressors.** Fake news about female snipers from Poland arriving in Ukraine has been used to suggest that European Union members states pose a threat to their neighbours. Although it is difficult to state with certainty why this imagery was used, arguably it gains attention by challenging traditional stereotypes of women as peaceful. Moreover, it gains appeal by tapping into long-standing urban myths of Russian military folklore that describe women who are blond, Amazon-like, nationalistic biathletes turned anti-Russian mercenaries.<sup>53</sup>

*Tactic 2:* Disinformation campaigns **create myths and lies about gender equality.** For example, across Central and Eastern Europe, violent extremist organisations (VEOs) use Cold War narratives of corrupt European states to increasingly develop and mobilise individuals around an ‘**anti-gender**’ discourse, **which argues that gender equality is an anti-family, pro-gay and anti-life ideology.**<sup>54</sup>

*Tactic 3:* Disinformation campaigns **fabricate information and statistics on contentious gender issues.** For example, XRW VEOs have also distributed **disinformation about the extent of sexual violence perpetrated by immigrants** to recruit men and women to their cause.<sup>55</sup>



*Tactic 4:* Disinformation campaigns by non-state actors **on emotive women’s rights issues make false links between issues and manipulate true statistics by removing contextual information.** For example, during the 2018 referendum on abortion in Ireland, a false link was made by the No campaign between abortion, depression and cancer. Moreover, statistics about Down syndrome and abortion were presented without nuance and context to drive people to false conclusions.<sup>56</sup>

*Tactic 5:* There is emerging evidence that foreign influence operations don’t support one particular viewpoint. Instead, they **bolster both sides** of discussions about contentious gender equality or SGM issues **to polarise debates, often using digital bots or algorithms to amplify both sides.**<sup>57</sup> For example, foreign state actors have spread messages that championed women’s right to equal pay while at the same time calling these systemic gender inequalities “a leftist falsehood”.<sup>58</sup>

## How to counter gendered disinformation

- 1. Commission research on the gender dimensions of disinformation to better understand** how gender roles, social norms and contentious gender issues are used in disinformation. Provide research data disaggregated by sex, age and other relevant variables to understand gender differences and gender-related trends (see **Box 7** (page 42) on commissioning gender-sensitive research or target audience analysis)
- 2. Identify gendered disinformation by asking:**
  - Are **gender stereotypes, gender roles, social norms on contentious and emotive gender issues being used** as part of the disinformation campaign?
  - What is the **purpose of this type of gendered disinformation** campaign? Is it meant to have a different effect on women compared to men (e.g. to silence female parliamentarians in particular)?
  - What are the **different communications techniques being targeted at women compared to men? Which communications techniques are used** to polarise the debate **on a specific gender issue** (e.g. fabricated sexualised images of female politicians or bots used to bolster both sides on contentious gender issues)?
  - How are the intention and the techniques combined to achieve an impact? **How does this impact differ for women and men** (e.g. to erode support for democratic institutions and to discourage women from participating in political life)?
- 3. When countering gendered disinformation:**
  - **Provide an alternative narrative on gender issues** in line with the UK Government’s gender equality commitments.
  - **Expose myths about UK policies on gender equality and correct false or misleading statistics on gender issues** (e.g. on sexual attacks on women by immigrants).
  - **Highlight disparities and hypocrisies** between disinformation narratives on gender issues and reality.
  - **Amplify credible women’s voices** that counter disinformation and promote social cohesion.
- 4. Discuss with implementers** whether they need **gender training** to better identify gender dimensions of disinformation and understand how to counter it. If so, **include the costs in budgets.**
- 5. Check that implementers have measures in place to mitigate risks related to gendered disinformation. These can include:**
  - offering psychological support to journalists and researchers who may suffer trauma after conducting investigations into disinformation on sexual violence;
  - putting in place additional security measures to protect journalists and contributors involved in debunking disinformation on contentious gender issues;
  - protecting personal data of female journalists, female contributors and SGM contributors.



6. Ensure that **programmes** which raise awareness on disinformation, build critical thinking skills, or build skills in digital literacy all **include content on gender dimensions of disinformation** and how to recognise it.
7. Support **broader programming aimed at reducing specific gender inequalities and grievances** that are exploited in gendered disinformation campaigns.
8. Support **broader programming aimed at stopping online harassment of women and girls** since disinformation is one form of online harassment (e.g. programming that urges young men to stop and question the potential consequences of re-posting content that harasses women and girls).
9. Support **civil society organisations** in conflict and stabilisation contexts involved in fighting gendered disinformation by providing psychological and other support to victims of gendered disinformation and online harassment and abuse, and by tackling the underlying gender inequalities and grievances that are exploited in gendered disinformation campaigns.
10. In conflict and stabilisation contexts, **facilitate attempts** by government actors, women's rights organisations, other civil society actors and high-profile women **to report gendered disinformation to social media platforms** so that they can remove it.

### Further reading

Find examples of countering gendered disinformation on the websites of [CODA Story](#), [StopFake](#) and [EU vs Disinfo](#).

<sup>40</sup> Source: UK Government Communication Service (2019) *RESIST: Counter-Disinformation Toolkit*. <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit/> [Accessed on 25/10/2019].

<sup>41</sup> Source: Wardle, C. and Derakhshan, H. (September 2017). *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Council of Europe, October, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> See: Amnesty International (2019) *Twitter: a toxic place for women*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]

<sup>43</sup> Source: Bradshaw, S. (2018). *The Gender Dimensions of Foreign Influence Operations*. Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford.

<sup>44</sup> Example: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2019/may/24/real-v-fake-debunking-the-drunk-nancy-pelosi-footage-video>

<sup>45, 46</sup> Source: Jankowicz, N. (2017, December 11). 'How Disinformation Became a New Threat to Women'. Coda Story. <https://codastory.com/disinformation/how-disinformation-became-a-new-threat-to-women/> [Accessed on 25/10/2019].

<sup>47</sup> [Amnesty International's online poll](#) showed that across the 8 countries polled, 32% of women who experienced abuse or harassment online said they had stopped posting content that expressed their opinion on certain issues, including 31% of women in the UK and 35% of women in the USA.

<sup>48</sup> "In Indonesia (32%) and Kenya (40%), the most common response to online VAW-P [violence against women in politics] was to ignore the online violence. However, 20% of survey respondents in Kenya paused their social media activity in response." Source: NDI (2019) *Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics*. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Tweets%20That%20Chill%20Report.pdf> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]

<sup>49</sup> Amnesty International (2019) *Twitter: a toxic place for women*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]; NDI, 2019. *Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics*.

<sup>50, 51</sup> EU vs Disinfo, *Faces of Western Women* (March 2019) <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/faces-of-western-women/> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]

<sup>52</sup> RICU (2016) 'Far right narratives on UK Social Media'. RICUAR16/031, UK, cited in UK Government (2019). *UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 – Implementing Strategic Outcome 6: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism*

<sup>53</sup> The presence of female snipers from the Baltic states has been something of an urban legend in Russian military folklore for several years, beginning as early as during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the early 1980s. Source: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/a-unit-of-women-snipers-from-the-baltic-states-arrived-in-donbas/> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]; See also: Hodge, N. (25 September 2008) 'The Return of 'White Tights': Mythical Female Snipers Stalk Russians. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2008/11/return-of-white/> [Accessed on 25/10/2019]; See also: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_Tights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Tights) [Accessed on 25/10/2019]

<sup>54, 55</sup> Based on: UK Government (2019). *UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 – Implementing Strategic Outcome 6: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism*.

<sup>56</sup> Redmond, B. (23 May 2018) *This is the deliberate disinformation being spread by Ireland's No campaign – and why it shouldn't be believed*. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/repeal-the-eighth-ireland-abortion-referendum-misinformation-yes-no-campaigns-a8363916.html> [Accessed on 07/01/2020].

<sup>57, 58</sup> Source: Bradshaw, S. (2018) *The Gender Dimensions of Foreign Influence Operations*. Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford University.